

they choose at lower costs, without the outrageous, expensive side effects of the President's health care law.

I thank the Presiding Officer.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

BURWELL NOMINATION

Mr. WYDEN. Madam President, after months and months of polarizing and divisive debate in the Senate about the Affordable Care Act, I rise today to strongly support the nomination of Sylvia Mathews Burwell because I firmly believe she will help the Senate come together to jointly work to improve American health care.

The reality is both political parties have had valid points on this critical issue. My party believes passionately, as I do, that everyone must be covered. Republicans feel equally passionate about having a real role for the private sector to help hold down costs and promote innovation. The Affordable Care Act does both. Working together, working together under the leadership of a talented official like Sylvia Mathews Burwell, we can build on that.

Ms. Burwell has earned much respect here in the Congress on both sides of the aisle. She had our distinguished colleague from Oklahoma TOM COBURN and our friend from West Virginia JAY ROCKEFELLER at the witness table together talking about how she had worked with both of them. She is a leader with a head and a heart, and she is qualified and experienced for this critical job at this critical time.

She is a graduate of Harvard and Oxford, where she was a Rhodes Scholar. Early in her career, she showed a commitment to service by becoming part of the Clinton administration. She was the Staff Director of the National Economic Council beginning in 1993. Soon she transitioned to be Chief of Staff to the Treasury Secretary. In 1997, she became Deputy Chief of Staff to the President and moved the following year to become the Deputy Director of OMB.

She has extensive experience in the nonprofit sector. She led efforts to address some of the most pressing global health challenges of our time. In 2011 she became the head of the Walmart Foundation.

I noted Sylvia Mathews Burwell's support, but here are a couple comments from the other side of the aisle. Senator BURR had this to say about Sylvia Mathews Burwell: "She comes with a portfolio of experience that would make her a tremendous asset at addressing some of the challenges that that agency specifically and uniquely has."

Here is what Senator COBURN had to say: "The fact is, when you have somebody that's competent and also has strong character, you find a way to get past your differences to try to solve problems."

So she has strong, vigorous support from both sides of the aisle.

Now, we all understand that the Affordable Care Act is going to be a central focus of her work every day as Secretary. Once she is confirmed, I am convinced—and Senator HATCH and I have talked about this again on a bipartisan basis—that we can come together to make the law work better.

For example, my colleague from Utah has done very good work in fixing the dysfunctional reimbursement system for Medicare known as the SGR. With Sylvia Mathews Burwell at the helm, we will get that done, and we will improve Medicare transparency because the public and taxpayers and seniors should not be in the dark about critical services.

I know Senator BEGICH is going to be making some important remarks about veterans, and I just appreciate my colleague giving me this quick minute or two because I wanted to bring a bipartisan case for Sylvia Mathews Burwell to be confirmed. We will have the beginning of the process go forward today and more discussion about her and, I am sure, the Affordable Care Act as well.

I strongly, strongly urge my colleagues to advance her nomination and to support her when we go to a final vote.

With that, I thank my colleague and yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

PROTECTING VETERANS

Mr. BEGICH. Madam President, I thank the Presiding Officer and thank my friend from Oregon.

I appreciate the opportunity to be on the floor today to talk about veterans care. It is an important issue that is not only critical to my State but across the country. As we know, it has been in the papers, on the TV, on the Internet, and everywhere else you can imagine.

There are few more important issues that we work on that have such a critical potential for impact on so many people, when you think about it. These folks have sacrificed so much for us—our veterans—and now it is important for us to make sure they have the proper care for all of their service.

Of course, the VA system is all over the national news, as I mentioned. Whatever you read, everywhere you turn, there is something about the system and what is going on. But I want to talk about Alaska's veterans programs that we are doing up there, especially around health care. For me, veterans are a big deal. It is a big deal because Alaska has so many.

Just to give you the lay of the land, we have over 77,000 veterans in Alaska. Almost 10 percent of the population of my State is veterans who have served this country in many different aspects throughout their careers and coming to Alaska to make it their home.

Along with the 77,000 veterans in Alaska, across the Nation the VA has

more than 11 million veterans registered or enrolled.

I have in the Chamber this picture of some rural veterans in Bethel, AK. I enjoyed being out there, and I have a story I will tell in a bit about the impact of some of the things we are doing in rural Alaska.

I think of these veterans like my uncle, U.S. Army Infantryman Joe Begich from up in the Iron Range of Minnesota, who will be there this weekend on an Honor Flight from Minnesota. My family is very proud of his service and the service of my late father-in-law Lou Bonito, who was an Army colonel in Vietnam.

We need to listen to their stories—not just on Memorial Day, not just on the D-day anniversary, which is this Friday. We need to listen to our veterans every single day. They deserve to be heard, just as they deserve to receive the benefits for which they fought.

Make no mistake about it. When I hear from veterans, the vast majority love the VA health care system and what is being provided to them.

I was in Alaska last week and met with veterans from all over the State. We do not have to wait for some headline or for CNN to run some story about what is wrong with the VA system.

My staff and I know what is going on with our care. We have regular meetings with the VA. As a matter of fact, when I first came to the Senate, some of the first issues we dealt with had to do with the VA and trying to make sure the Veterans Administration is dealing with Alaska's unique situation of how diverse it is and how far apart many of these services are in getting to our veterans.

When this issue started coming up on a national level this last week and over the last few weeks regarding the problems, especially in Phoenix—don't get me wrong. I am outraged, as is every American and every Alaskan, about what was going on there and what probably is happening in other VA facilities around the country as we hear about more internal audits being done. But we saw this problem. I saw this problem growing in Alaska. It was clear to me there was inadequate staffing in Alaska, along with some other programmatic problems, and systematic delivery system problems. What it meant was in Alaska, when I saw this problem, we had over almost 1,000 people waiting 2, 3 months for just their initial appointment to get VA health care services. This was unacceptable. So I convened a field hearing in Alaska to look at these issues and figure out what we could do to improve the system.

Today, the average wait time for our VA veterans, our veterans in Alaska, to get their initial appointment is now down to 9 days. As a matter of fact, the list, which we monitor on a regular basis from our office, is down to less than two dozen. That fluctuates from